

Situating Servant Leadership Within Educational Leadership: Case Study of Trust as a Relational Element in Teacher–Principal Relationships

Angela Bradley

Louisiana State University, USA

Margaret-Mary Martine Sulentic Dowell

Louisiana State University, USA

Imre Emeric Csaszar

Louisiana State University, USA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Situated within the current complex climate of public education in the United States, in this autoethnographic case study, the relational aspect of trust as a characteristic of servant leadership within the principal-teacher relationship was investigated. Examining the role that trust played in improving a school's culture and how trust was established and maintained among one principal and the teachers whom she supervised was explored. Data sources included weekly reflections, a questionnaire, and email artifacts. Leadership practices were examined through the lens of Tschannen-Moran's five faces of trust. Teachers gauged their level of trust in their leader, rating her servant leadership characteristics. Results indicated the five faces of trust were apparent in this school leader. Based on characteristics and actions that led to trusting teacher-principal relationships, teachers tended to trust her as a leader to a high degree. Overarching themes included leader openness, leader competence and professionalism, leader benevolence, and leader's high regard for teachers.

INTRODUCTION

In the past 25 years, public education in the United States (US) has shifted and evolved. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, in a very real sense, US public schooling has been reinvented. Public education in the US has experienced many shifts from its beginning as an initial opportunity only allowed to White males of means and privilege when the US was first established. Later, US public education was a segregated system for almost a century (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896) until the passage of *Brown vs the Board of Education* (*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 1954), moving to a more inclusive and all-encompassing endeavor as a means to educate the populace and instill civic pride and further demographic principles. However, from 2000 to the 2020s, public education in the US has undergone a commodification and commercialization (Portfilio, 2011; Schneider, 2014; Shannon, 2003) that has narrowed curriculum, restricted teachers, and has had a profound impact on the role of leadership in US public schools. Lack of teacher voice and commodification has also resulted in a serious teacher retention issue within US public schools (Milner, 2013).

Historically, the goal and mission of public schools in the US was as an enterprise to freely educate the masses (Carnoy & Levin, 1985) despite historical evidence that this same history paints a portrait and provides a narrative of denied access for many citizens and certain segments of the US general public. In the 20th century, the denial to educate all illustrates the experiences of segregated members of US society, denying certain members the opportunity of obtaining a public education (Cubberley, 1919). A pioneer US educator, Horace Mann (1796-1859), known as a reformer and politician from Massachusetts, instituted the notion that “education should be universal, non-sectarian, free, and that its aims should be social efficiency, civic virtue, and character, rather than mere learning or the advancement of education ends” (Cubberley, 1919, p. 167). Mann championed the conceptualization of Normal Schools to train teachers, encouraging the Common School Movement which advocated for children to be socialized to be citizens (Groen, 2008). This concept of public schools as a mechanism to create, nurture, and maintain a democratic society was also fostered by Dewey’s (1903; 1922) Progressive Educational Movement, which emerged at the turn of the 20th century in the US (from 1888 to 1929). Dewey (1903; 1915; 1922) advocated for *critical citizenship* through public education.

A free public education as a mechanism for promoting democratic principles continued through the 1950s in the US, as educators and policymakers encouraged formal public schooling as a means to equalize socioeconomic opportunity in US society (Carnoy & Levin, 1985). Embedded within the US Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and the Equal Rights Movement of the 1970s, the conceptualization that education could improve social injustices was supported and fortified as the US Congress passed the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) on April 1, 1965. Explicitly, ESEA directly addressed issues of poverty and educational equity by directing federal funds to school systems or local educational agencies (LEAs), which served to both confirm and acknowledge as well as reaffirm the significant relationship between low educational attainment and low socioeconomic status. Since the passage of the ESEA, scholars such as Freire (1970), Giroux (1988), Giroux and McLaren (1992), Kincheloe (2005), and Shannon (1992; 2003), have advocated for teachers, and by extension, educational leaders to engage in critical pedagogical practices – educational approaches dedicated to transforming oppressive relations of power. Subsequent reauthorizations of ESEA, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (2001), and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (2015), while perhaps well-intended, have exacerbated, not closed, opportunity gaps due to the advent of prescriptive curricula and intense focus on standardized test results; this commodification has curtailed how a typical principal might enact leadership.

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